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SUBJECT: IRANIAN REACTIONS TO BRITISH DETENTIONS

REF: DUBAI IRPO 0018

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian L. Burns, Director, Iran Regional
Presence Office, Dubai, UAE.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S/NF) Summary: Several Iranians discussed their views of what prompted the March 23 detention of British sailors and marines by the Iranian military. All three thought the action was preplanned, although it was less clear whether it had pre-approval by the Supreme Leader. All felt the detention of the five Iranian Quds Force personnel by US forces in Irbil contributed to Iran's motivation for taking such an action, with Iran wanting to demonstrate its strength. One contact claimed, however, that the detention of the five Iranians was not a major issue in Iranian public opinion. Another contact thought the Iranian action may have also been an attempt by radicals to seize power away from the so-called pragmatists who purportedly gained strength with the outcome of the December elections. The recommendations of these contacts for dealing with Iran vary greatly between those living in Iran and those outside. End comment.

Former IRGC General believes Supreme Leader approved action

2.(S/NF) A purported former Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) general maintained that the motivation for the March 23 detention of British soldiers was the US detention in Irbil of five IRGC personnel, as well as UK-Iranian clashes (NFI) in Basra predating the detention. According to the general, the IRGC was likely concerned that the British were planning an Irbil-type raid in Basra against it and wanted to preempt them with a show of strength. He added that the incident appeared very well planned and was convinced the Supreme Leader gave his pre-approval. He believes that President Ahmadi-Nejad is not a political decision-maker in Iran.

3.(S/NF) When asked why target the British if IRGC anger was mostly focused on the Irbil detentions, the former general reasoned that unlike the Americans, the British are already on their way out in Iraq so Iran would reason they would be less inclined than the Americans to escalate the situation. Also, he said, Iran would like to be able to claim that they helped push the British out of Iraq, similar to Hizballah claims that it

ended the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. He doubted that the Iranians used the detention to test Western reaction to such an incident but said it served this purpose regardless. Asked if he thought the intent of the Iranians was to change the subject of international discourse from the nuclear issue, he said he did not know, but that if that had been their intent, they were wrong to think it would work.

4.(S/NF) When asked if the Iranian government likely understood the highly negative international reaction that the video "confessions" of the detainees would provoke, the general said he doubted it, saying that those involved in the operation are largely ignorant of the West. The general asserted that the peaceful resolution of the incident would likely have a positive impact on overall Iranian-Western relations, setting a precedent that diplomatic solutions work. In contrast to some of our interlocutors (reftel), the former general asserted that Iran does not want direct conflict with the US.

5.(S/NF) The general went on to reason that releasing the five Iranians detained by the US in Irbil would provide a "golden opportunity" for further improving the political atmosphere. He said it would send a message to Iran that when it takes a "positive" step, i.e. releasing the detainees, the US is prepared to reciprocate. He claimed this strategy would weaken the extremists in Iran more than passing UN Security Council resolutions against the country. He believes the Iranian people as a whole supported the detention of the British soldiers, as a warning to the West not to detain Iranians. On the other hand, he acknowledged that the Iranian people do not seem too well informed or irate about the five Iranian detainees in Irbil. Nonetheless, he argued, their release without conditions would have a positive impact. He said Iranians had taken note of an evolution in US rhetoric on Iran, based on a calmer, less aggressive tone. Therefore, he reasoned, if the US made a positive gesture, public opinion in Iran would put pressure on the Iranian government to respond in kind.

6.(S/NF) When asked about public opinion in Iran regarding the

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IRGC-Quds Force, he said the general public knew little about the various divisions within the IRGC and saw it as one organization. He deflected the question about general attitudes towards the IRGC and talked instead about the history of the Quds Force. He said it was created about 20 years ago, towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, initially to help Palestinians combat Israeli aggression. Since then, its mandate had been expanded to unconnected issues, such as Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. He added that its members are more competent and more committed to the revolution than the rest of the IRGC, and membership is very selective.

Professor assumes pre-approval

7.(S/NF) An Iranian professor said that the detention of the five Iranians in Irbil had a "huge effect" on the Iranian government, and that the government's response was the detention of the British sailors and marines. He obviously believed Iranian press reports that the US would release the detainees by Nowruz and wondered why this had not occurred. He added that the local IRGC commander (no name given) in the region where the Brits were picked up is not the type to take unauthorized actions, so he assumed there had been some kind of pre-approval.

Oppositionist says 50-50 chance leader approved

8.(S/NF) In a phone conversation prior to their release about the British detentions with US-based Mohsen Sazegara (please protect), a founder of the IRGC who has since become a reformer, Sazegara said there was a 50-50 chance that the incident had preapproval from the Supreme Leader. Not everything in Iran is preplanned, he said. He reasoned that such an event could have been orchestrated by a group of radicals to assert its political

hand over pragmatists, who were bolstered by their general success in the December 2006 elections. Whether or not the Supreme Leader had advanced warning of the incident mattered little, he said, since Supreme National Security Council Secretary Larijani's subsequent statements about the possibility

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of trying the detainees indicated that the Supreme Leader was in control of the situation. Larijani would not have gotten involved without the explicit instructions from the Supreme Leader, Sazegara reasoned.

9.(S/NF) Sazegara's explanations for why the detention occurred included several tacks:

-- whenever Iran has internal problems, it creates an external crisis -- for instance, the 1979 hostage situation (to distract from the chaos of the revolution) and the Salman Rushdie affair (to distract from the Iran-Iraq war ceasefire). In this way, Iran can divert attention from internal issues and have an excuse to stir up nationalism and crack down on internal dissent. (Note: The British detentions occurring just prior to the passage of UNSCR 1747 certainly served to preempt news of the resolution's passage in Iran. Endnote)

-- to demonstrate Iran's strength after three "humiliations":

1) detentions in Irbil of top Quds Force personnel; 2) two UNSCRs passed unanimously, including by "friends" of Iran; and 3) demonstrations by Russia of its ability to start and stop the Bushehr project.

10.(S/NF) Sazegara said that Iran likely had little fear it would pay a serious price for the detentions. He claimed that the Supreme Leader's New Year message demonstrated his confidence that the US and West will not attack Iran. Furthermore, according to Sazegara, the Supreme Leader has tried for the last 10 years to create a situation where people think they have no power to do or change anything in Iran. Therefore, reasoned Sazegara, the Supreme Leader currently believes he faces no real threat from internal groups or external forces. In Sazegara's view, Iran feels it can tolerate any sanction, short of an oil boycott, and it does not think the international community would impose an oil boycott because of oil demands.

11.(S/NF) Sazegara said he heard Khatami had met with the Supreme Leader (no timeframe given) and told him the situation was dangerous, and Iran was risking war, but the Supreme Leader told him not to worry, that Iran has the upper hand. Many technocrats in the regime don't like the current situation, but they have no say, claimed Sazegara. He added that if Rafsanjani

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tries to exert influence, his sons are threatened with corruption investigations, leaving the Supreme Leader and the security and intelligence forces the upper hand.

12.(S/NF) Comment: The policy recommendations regarding dealing with Iran from those still connected to Iran and those outside often vary widely. In this case, the former general (now a Dubai-based businessman) and the professor both claim not to like Ahmadi-Nejad, and the professor in particular was critical of what he saw as a fundamental flaw of the regime trying to mix Islamic rule and democracy, but neither could be categorized as oppositionists. (Note: both were introduced to IRPO by the same longstanding Iranian-American contact. Endnote) Sazegara has apparently completely broken with the regime and faces charges in Iran. The general and the professor both advocated changing Iran's behavior through engagement, which they said would increase public pressure on the Iranian government to move toward rebuilding relations, although their recommendations seem unlikely to succeed. The general proposed starting by releasing the Irbil detainees, and the professor claimed that opening up US trade would have greater impact on Iran than military action, while at the same time sparing the region greater instability. The professor, in particular, did not seem to realize how unlikely it was that the US would open trade relations with Iran

prior to resolving differences. Sazegara, on the other hand, advocated threatening to deny Iran the ability to repatriate its profits from oil sales until it agrees to a Helsinki-type process and frees political prisons, reopens its shuttered reformist press, and holds free elections. It would seem that this threat would only be effective if other countries would sign on, and that appears unlikely for the time being.

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